

The background of the entire page is a photograph of ancient rock art on a dark, textured rock surface. In the upper left, there is a small, stylized human figure with outstretched arms. In the center, a large, light-colored animal, possibly a bison or buffalo, is depicted in profile, facing right. Below it, another smaller animal is visible. The text is overlaid on this image.

# Walls that speak

## Rock Art in the Southwest



Mitchell Museum  
of the American Indian

Tom Petrillo

August 2 – October 5, 2008



My first encounter with the “Land of Enchantment” came as a university student in ‘70s., but the true depth of enchantment didn’t occur until the mid ‘90’s. Our family vacation that year took us to Chaco Canyon and not far from the visitors center I encountered a large petroglyph panel, and learned of the Sun Dagger atop Fajada Butte. The combination of ancient markings and celestial markers started a journey to explore the Southwest in search of Rock Art and Ancient Cultures.

For the past 15 years I have hiked, camped, and explored various locales in Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. I return most often to Southeastern Utah, near the town of Bluff, to hike Comb Ridge, Cedar Mesa, Grand Gulch and raft along the San Juan River. Within this region is an incredibly dense array of Rock Art and ruins. It is hard to imagine how much has been removed by early “archaeologists” like, Richard Wetherill and Charles McCloyd who shipped box cars full of pots, mummies, and artifacts east to various collectors. Yet what remains in its eerie silence speaks volumes to the spirit of those that abandoned the canyons.

Canyon de Chelly in Arizona deserves special attention. To the casual visitor touring the rim, or hiking down to White House ruin the beauty lies in the landscape which is inspiring. I was fortunate to spend a week camping and exploring the canyon with a Navajo family, Lupita and Jon. They introduced us to the canyon from the Navajo perspective, shared their stories and histories, and revealed hidden Rock Art gems.

The photographs are printed digitally. In some cases, like the ancients, I’ve embellished aspects of the Rock Art. For me this is done with computer software increasing the contrast, subtly adding to it’s color and showing the context in which the Rock Art exists. One theory regarding Rock Art is that some panels existed to give the hunters good luck and to receive that blessing the hunters would rub the heart or hooves of the animals they were hunting, adding their special signature to a panel that existed years before them.

Similarly I hope to comment on the Rock Art through my photography. [www.tompetrillo.com](http://www.tompetrillo.com)

Special thanks to John Low Mitchell Muesum of the American Indian, Evanston, IL



**Hunting Panel, Nine Mile Canyon, UT, 2000** The Hunting panel is a large petroglyph located within Nine Mile Canyon near Price, Utah. The canyon is decorated with petroglyphs from the Fremont Indians.



**Calf Creek, Escalante, UT, 2002** In the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, the lower Calf Creek Falls trail follows Calf Creek to a beautiful waterfall. Along the way on a distant canyon wall are three mysterious pictographs.



**Moon House, Cedar Mesa, UT, 2002** Moon House is set in an alcove in McCloyds Canyon. It is so named for the Moon Pictograph located within the structure.



**Pictograph Cave, Canyon de Chelly, AZ, 2005** Pictograph Cave is filled with Pictographs (drawn with pigment) from the Basketmaker era. This section has an unusual number of twins. Twins held a special place in many ancient cultures. Just outside the frame are more twin turkeys and shaman.



**Procession Panel, Comb Ridge, UT, 2004** Procession Panel is a series of petroglyph panels. This section is perhaps the longest and records animal and human references. Note how some sections are marked “twice” indicating later cultures “commented” perhaps requesting good luck on their hunting expedition. Located in Comb Ridge near Bluff, UT.



**Butler Wash, Comb Ridge, UT, 2004** Along the San Juan River near Bluff UT., is a huge San Juan Anthropomorphic petroglyph. Depicting 5 foot figures with ornate headresses and necklaces. Careful inspection can reveal Basketmaker Rock Art underneath.



**Pictograph Cave – Dog, Canyon de Chelly, AZ, 2005** Pictograph Cave houses numerous pictographs. These Basketmaker pictographs are being covered by mud during the summer thunderstorms. The two atlatlas help date this panel to the pre bow and arrow era.

Was the six legged dog a drawing mistake, or a reference to the special place the unusual has in ancient cultures.



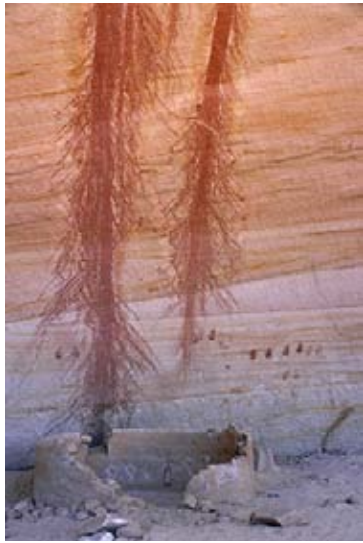
**Horseshoe Canyon, Canyonlands, UT, 2002** Horseshoe Canyon is located in the western section Canyonlands Utah. This Barrier Reef Pictograph is part of the “Great Gallery.” The pictographs are at least 2000 years old and measure six feet tall in some cases. Many other pictographs can be found in Horseshoe Canyon



**Bird Head, Canyon de Chelly, AZ, 2004** The Bird head motif may represent the spiritual side to the ancients, as the bird can take flight carrying the soul into the sky. This pictograph shows the fragility of some Rock Art. Either the binding agent or the pigment has begun to fade and portions of both the body and bird head are missing adding a contemporary and unintended interpretation.



**Dog Rock, Canyon de Chelly, AZ, 2004** Dog Rock can be seen in the distance from a small cave. Subtle pictographs, hand prints and shamans decorate the walls. On the ceiling are star marking most likely marked by Navajos during the modern era.



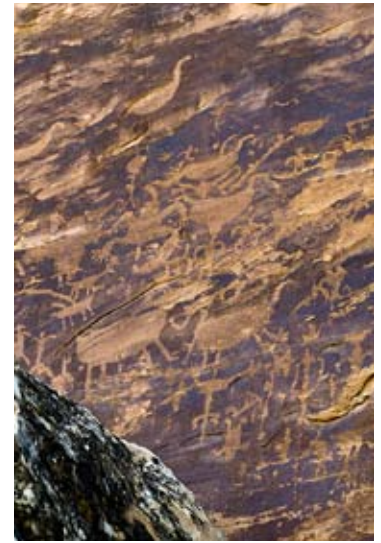
**Kiva, Natural Bridges, UT, 2002**  
Natural Bridges is home to large bridges that span the deep canyons. Near one of the bridges are panels of petroglyphs and the remains of a small Kiva like structure.



**Top of the Comb, Comb Ridge, UT, 2008**  
Comb Ridge slowly rises like a wave to about 500 feet above the desert. This small site located at the very top of the Comb looks westward toward Cedar Mesa. The Rock Art is along the bottom of sandstone tower.



**Super Nova, Chaco Canyon, NM, 2004**  
Located in Chaco Canyon National Monument, New Mexico, the Supernova pictograph is found along the trail to Peñasco Blanco. In 1054 A.D. astronomers noted an exploding star which corresponds to the date of this pictograph.



**Polly's Island, Grand Gulch, UT, 2006**  
Near Polly's Island is a large petroglyph depicting Big Horn sheep, turkeys and hunters. Look carefully to find the Kokopelli figure near the bottom.



**Road Canyon, Cedar Mesa, UT, 2008** Road Canyon is one of the many canyons in Cedar Mesa UT. This petroglyph is on top of a large flat rock along the canyon bottom.



**Ancient Hands, Grand Gulch, UT, 2006** Hands are a common theme in Rock Art. These ancient pictographs are located near Polly's Island in Grand Gulch. The nearby ruin overlooks both the Gulch and their handprints.



**Fish Canyon, Cedar Mesa, UT, 2006** Grand Gulch in south-east Utah is rich with Anasazi history. Fish and McCloyd are two of many canyons filled with petroglyphs and pictographs. This composite unites hands and imagery from various locations.

**Gallery Talk**  
**September 11, 2008**



**Mitchell Museum**  
*of the* **American Indian**

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